Committee on Government Reform

Congressman Tom Davis, Chairman

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Safer Alternative or Modern Day Snake Oil? Government Reform Committee to Review "Reduced Risk" Tobacco Products

'Harm Reduction' Market Offers Both Potential Promise, New Dangers

What: Government Reform Committee hearing on "Potential Reduced Exposure/Reduced Risk Tobacco Products: An Examination of the Possible Public Health Impact and Regulatory Challenges"

When: Tuesday, June 3, 2003, 2 p.m.

Where: Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building

Background:

Approximately one quarter of the adult U.S. population smokes. Of this, 70 percent express a desire to quit. While 34 percent of them make an attempt to do so every year, less than 3 percent succeed. These numbers beg the question: Are current approaches to controlling tobacco-related morbidity and mortality sufficient?

In recent years, we have seen pharmaceutical products such as the patch and nicotine gum emerge as cessation aids. We are also seeing growth in the 'harm-reduction' tobacco market – products that aim to decrease harm to health from tobacco use without completely eliminating it. These latter products are largely unregulated, and there are questions whether these products, which give the impression of being a safer alternative to conventional cigarettes, serve the public interest.

A 2001 study by the Institute of Medicine, Clearing the Smoke: Assessing the Science Base for Tobacco Harm Reduction, makes several points. First, it is feasible, but not easy, to produce tobacco products that could expose the consumer to lower levels of toxins than conventional cigarettes. Second, it is possible that reduced exposure to these toxins could reduce the risk of tobacco-related disease and death. Finally, great care must be taken to ensure these products do not actually result in increased harm to public health.

"Harm reduction presents both promise and uncertainty," Committee Chairman Tom Davis said. "There is still much we do not know about tobacco-related illness, nor do we fully understand why people smoke cigarettes in the first place. Finding answers to these questions is a critical component of harm-reduction efforts. Another core concern is that while these products may be able to remove a degree of the risk for users, the notion of a 'safer' product could prove damaging to the population as a whole. Smokers who might otherwise quit tobacco altogether could instead opt for the 'safer' products. Those who had already quit could be enticed to start anew. And children, already convinced of their invincibility, could be drawn to a life of tobacco-dependency by the lure of 'safe' tobacco. We need to address these concerns as we begin to review the effects of these products on public health, and examine what sort of regulatory structure would best ensure the development of products designed to provide tobacco users with less dangerous sources of nicotine than conventional cigarettes."

WITNESSES

Panel One

Dr. Scott Leischow, Chief, Tobacco Control Research Branch, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health

Dr. Stuart Bondurant, Chairman, Committee to Assess the Science Base for Tobacco Harm Reduction, Institute of Medicine

Mr. Lee Peeler, Deputy Director, Bureau of Consumer Protection, Federal Trade Commission

Panel Two

Mr. Michael E. Szymanczyck, Chairman and CEO, Philip Morris USA, Inc.

Mr. Richard H. Verheij, Executive Vice President, U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company

Dr. Dorothy K. Hatsukami, Professor, University of Minnesota

Dr. Jack Henningfield, Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Dr. Gregory Connelly, Director, Tobacco Control Program, Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Mr. David T. Sweanor, Senior Legal Counsel, Non-Smokers' Rights Association

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